

OUR CHRISTMAS SYMBOLS



AYLENE E.
AND CAMERON COOKE

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by

AYLENE E. AND CAMERON COOKE

*Dedicated to those who would enjoy a
richer Christmas.*

Price One Dollar

Printed in U.S.A.

The Graphic Press, Inc., Raleigh, N. C.

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Copies of "Our Christmas Symbols" may be obtained by mail from Aylene E. Cooke, Post Office Box 395, Durham, North Carolina. Price one dollar, plus 10¢ postage. Two or more copies postpaid.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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MAR 10 1954

Aylene Cooke / author

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OUR CHRISTMAS



STAR in the sky, carols in the evening air, a candle in the window, a wreath on the door, mistletoe hung high, poinsettias afame in the firelight, gifts spilling from beneath a lighted tree, friends around the holiday table, families reunited in love, church bells in the morning—This is Christmas in America.

Not like Christmas in any other land, but like Christmas in many lands is our American Christmas.

Rich treasures of custom and tradition, woven into a pattern with our own country's threads, have given us the colorful pageantry of our Christmastide.

Let us then listen to the lesson of the years and the centuries and not to what the hours are saying. The hours are often discouraging—war, hate, famine, pestilence, a Caesar on the throne, a Paul in prison, the gods in ascendancy, Christians in the Catacombs. But now, after the centuries—the Caesars gone; Paul a symbol of Faith; and Jesus, the Truth and the Light, reaching out to every nation.

Although the melodies of the songs are not the same, nor the customs and traditions alike, all seek the Star, the Christ-Child of Bethlehem. Let us at Christmastide bring our gifts of many kinds to Him, and may the message of our songs, in whatever language, be "Glory to God,—and on earth Peace."

And as we write Anno Domini in our dates, let us truly make our years, years of our Lord.

CHRISTMASTIDE



NE of mankind's greatest experiences is the season of Christmas.

Although little is known about its beginnings, the panorama of its history portrays some of Man's richest and deepest experiences in living, in Literature, in Music, and in Art.

We are unsure of the exact date of the Christ-Child's birth; nor do we know when the Holy Birthday was first celebrated as the festival of Christmas. But even though the origin of our customs and traditions surrounding Christmas are lost in time, the festivities that mark this day are a part of the universal history of mankind. Indeed, the Truths of Christmas lie close at the heart of the Christian religion.

Christmas is our festival of the birth of Jesus Christ and comes on December the 25th. Throughout early Christian history, however, the date varied from the middle of November until the middle of January. By the third century the Church had fixed the day

as the 25th and the date was soon generally accepted although some peoples, such as the Armenians, observed Old Christmas (January 6) until recently.

In North Carolina, however, the inhabitants of Rodanthe on the Outer Banks of the Coast still keep January 5th as Christmas, just as their English forebears did before the adoption of the present Gregorian Calendar. A mythical bull, Old Buck, has long been supposed to roam through Cape Hatteras' Woods on Christmas Eve. Legend, similar to an old Norwegian one, has him emerging from Trent Woods while celebrating inhabitants on the Island play fife and drum. A make-believe bull, looking like Old Buck, each year, for over 200 years, has been the center of the gaiety of Old Christmas on Rodanthe.

Christmas Eve over the world finds preparations for Christmas finished and most people then observing a long-kept custom—the giving of gifts in persons to kindred and friends while wishing them a "Merry Christmas."

THE SYMBOLS OF CHRISTMAS



MERRY CHRISTMAS is about 1440 years old. Before that it was surrounded with great solemnity. In the early Christian era only spiritual aspects of the festival appeared. There was no ringing of bells on Christmas morn, no garlands of green were hung, no friends were about the festive board. The hymns, such as those of St. Ambrose and others, all had only one theme, the mysteries of the Holy Birth. However, through contacts with pagan environments, both in Europe and Asia, over long periods of time, a Christmas combining both the reverent and secular elements came to be. By the early sixth century to the solemn aspects of Christmas had been added many elements involving gods, druids and deities.

One of the earliest and most influential of these alien feasts was that of Saturn, a deity of Italy, celebrated in late December. The central theme of this

season was the sense of brotherhood. Peace and happiness must reign among mankind—public squares were bedecked with greenery, gifts exchanged and truces made if war was in progress.

Occurring at about the same time of year, was the Roman Kalends of January when public officials were inducted into office amid the good wishes and celebrations of friends. Presents were widely exchanged and a holiday mood prevailed throughout the Empire.

In Northern Europe the Christmas season coincided with Yule celebrations and centered in the plentious Yule board, a custom continued in our groaning Christmas tables.

After the Christianizing of the nations, customs and superstitions which had belonged to pagan winter celebrations receded and Christ's love for mankind as expressed in his teachings became the motivating force in Christian observances of the Holy Birthday.



THE EVERGREENS

THE most striking and the most universal feature of Christmas is the use of evergreens in church and home. From earliest times evergreens have been thought to carry the blessing of eternal life. Cathedrals and churches on their feast days have been bedecked with them throughout recorded history. In Isaiah LX:13 we find these words: "The Glory of Lebanon shall come unto thee, the fir tree, the pine tree and the box together, to beautify the place of thy sanctuary."

Our forefathers very fittingly called the procuring of these evergreens, "Bringing Home Christmas."

The plants most found in Christmas use are holly, ivy, mistletoe and rosemary. The ancient Romans used holly for decoration and sent branches of it to their friends as gifts. In old English songs holly and ivy are found to be sometimes side by side and sometimes in antagonism. Holly is represented as the man's plant, ivy the woman's. Under Christian thought and sentiment, holly became widely used in church celebrations while ivy remained on a secular level. Holly was considered as the burning bush, a symbol of Mary whose being glows with the Holy Spirit. The red berries represented the blood drops from the cruel thorns in the crown of Jesus; the leaves, always green, signaled eternal life. Today our holly wreaths with their star of light in the center symbolize the Joyful Mysteries of the Incarnation and the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Cross and Passion. In England, as in our country, its use portends the season of feasting and good cheer.

The mistletoe, which Virgil named the Golden

Branch, is fullest of romance. In ancient Britain its cutting took place with great solemnity. A stately procession went into the woods, robed in white and carrying a golden sickle. When the Chosen Oak was reached, the Arch-Druid cut the sacred plant which fell into a cloth held by a band of immaculate maidens. Sacrifices and incantations followed and before the crowd dispersed the mistletoe was divided into small pieces and given to the people to place over their doorways. Called "all-heal," it was considered symbolical of the healing power of our Lord and used to adorn churches at Christmas. At the Cathedral of York, bundles or wreaths of it were placed upon the altar at Christmastime and payments for it recorded in the church records. Indeed, it was considered so sacred that enemies made a truce whenever they met beneath its branches. From this old custom has come our practice of suspending mistletoe over the doorway as a token of goodwill. Early Christians in England gave each other the sacred kiss of peace and goodwill as

a token of reconciliation before receiving the Holy Sacrament of the Altar. In Romans 16:16 is found, "Salute one another with an holy kiss!"

Lovers through the ages have sealed their vows with a kiss under the mistletoe bough, as it has long betokened happiness, good fortune, long life and fertility. An old rule of long ago said that if you wished to be married in the coming year, you must be kissed under the mistletoe at Christmas.

Rosemary was once the choicest Christmas decoration. It grew in profusion under the olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane. England learned to love it when in 1328 it came there as a gift to the wife of Edward III from her mother. Branches of rosemary were hung around rooms for its fragrance which was noted by the poet, Sir Thomas Moore. We still say, "Rosemary for remembrance."

According to the Spanish legend the clothes of the swaddling Babe gave rosemary its aroma when they were laid upon it to dry. Its color, now deep

lavender, was once white. The change took place when Mary, so the story tells, spread her purple robe on a rosemary bush while resting with Joseph and the Babe.

Colonial Americans presented to each other gifts of nosegays of mixed herbs, some being the edible, or "nibbling" kinds. Thyme is supposed to have come from the bed of Mary, while pennyroyal, also much prized, was often seen in Creches or manger scenes because it blossomed at midnight.

The sanctity of evergreens is nowhere more clearly seen than in the manner of their disposal. The holly was burned, the mistletoe bough was kept until another one took its place and the rosemary was ground into a powder for sachets. Never were these evergreens, which had added so much to the charm of the Christmas scene, carelessly thrown out nor left to brown and decay in doorways.

THE YULELOG

HE hearth has for long ages been the center of family activities and it is natural that the Yulelog early came to be associated with Christmas. Different woods were used, usually stripped of their bark. From this fact has come the English proverb, "He's as bare as the bark at Yule." Only clean hands were deemed worthy to light the log with a carefully preserved brand from last year's fire. Often the Yulelog was decorated with brightly colored paper flowers and ribbons and was placed on the fire with ceremony and rejoicing.

For centuries the English people made getting the Yulelog a joyous occasion. Old and young trooped along, singing, while the stout log was borne to the house by many hands. Passersby joined in carrying it or doffed their hats. Before placing it on the fire, toasts were said and wine poured on it in the name of the Trinity.

In the Southern United States, slaves chose the

biggest log possible for the fireplace, water-soaked to prolong its burning, as the custom was that as long as the Yulelog burned it was Christmas—no work and much jollity.

Around the fire many games were played, some now unfamiliar to us, as "Hot Cockles Hot," and "Yawning for a Cheshire Cheese." In its glow the newly polished silver was set and, with the candles, the carols, and the evergreens all a part of the Yule observance, was created the familiar Christmas aspect of homes just as we see everywhere today.



CANDLES AT CHRISTMAS

ARLIEST man used torches and beacon fires to dispel the darkness of night. In the worship of their gods, especially the

sun gods, the pagans built huge bonfires in winter to keep up their deities' strength and, it was thought, to bring them back again.

Mankind early associated the light of the candle with spiritual longing. The Old Testament refers to the candle as the symbol of spiritual light. In Psalms 18:28 we read, "For thou will light my candle; the Lord My God will enlighten my darkness."

The Romans burned candles before the altars of their gods and with them they lighted their pagan merrymakings while the martyr Christians used them to light the catacombs. Christians have always believed that the coming of Christ brought light into the darkness of a heathen world. The early Christians saw that the candle was adaptable to their beliefs for had not Christ referred to Himself as the Light of the World and also asserted that each Christian was a light? Candles on their altars reminded them of this teaching. They knew, too, of the Biblical reference to candles and candlesticks in the early temples.

Solomon had placed ten golden candles in his temple, and later the Emperor Constantine had illuminated Constantinople on Christmas Eve with many thousand candles.

In the medieval church the candle was traditionally of beeswax, the belief being that bees came to earth directly from heaven. On Candlemas Day (February 2) candles were blessed and Scripture read describing the candle as the symbol of the Christian's love for Christ.

Many countries use candles as a symbol of Faith at Christmas. With them the Irish welcome the Christ-Child, and strangers, also, in His Name on Christmas Eve; Italians keep a lighted one before their Creches; Spaniards place them over the doorways; Swedes, in honor of St. Lucy, wear them in a circlet on their hair on her feast day (December 13); Bulgarians take a lighted candle and awaken the animals on Christmas Eve; and Americans welcome in the glad season with candles aglow in home and

church, many of them handmade as in our colonial times.

The lovely legend of the Christ Child walking abroad to enter the hearts of men on Christmas Eve has come to us from Ireland. Our candle in the window invites Him to cross the threshold and then lights Him on His Way.

GIFTS

 HE love of the shepherds who worshipped at Jesus' birth was all they had. So, from the beginning of Christian gift-giving, love has been the most important part of our gift.

Evergreen boughs were brought by the early Druid Worshippers to their gods. These garlands were greatly revered and have always signified eternal life. Along with other presents, in Roman gift-giving, friends exchanged green branches for the sake of good luck. They were thought to carry a blessing into the home and their use was widespread. Christians have re-

garded the evergreens as the symbol of the everlasting gift of life brought by Christ to man.

Unique in mankind's long history of generous givers is the story of St. Nicholas, Bishop of Myra in Lycia in the fourth century A. D. He is reputed to have been very wealthy, his emblem being three purses or three golden balls. This was the symbol then of rich Italian families; it survives today in the sign of our pawnshop. The good Bishop gave his money away secretly to those whom he found in need. He was deeply interested in young people, giving his wealth especially to maidens whose lack of a dowry was affecting their matrimonial future, and to needy boys. Gifts coming from unknown sources were commonly attributed to him and parents customarily gave him credit for their gifts to their children. The discovery of his generosity is said to have been made by the father of three dowry-less daughters. The eldest two having each received from the chimney on successive nights a substantial gift

of gold with her name on it, the father resolved to watch and see who their generous benefactor could be. His vigil revealed the good St. Nicholas as the donor of the gifts. His name survives today as the human embodiment of unselfish giving.

Hanging up our stockings in pleasant anticipation of Santa's gifts may have originated from the fact that the maidens of this Bishopric of Myra, needing and expecting a dowry from the good St. Nicholas, suspended a stocking to catch the money purse the generous Bishop was sure to drop down the chimney.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE



HE jewel of Christmas is the Christmas Tree. It is new as we use it now, the first decorated, gift-laden tree being only a little over a hundred years old. However, throughout history, man's use of trees in worship has been an evergreen tree. In the Garden of Eden it is said to have blossomed and borne fruit, but its foliage shrank to

tiny leaves when Eve plucked its fruit. On the night that Christ was born it is believed to have blossomed again and so the evergreen tree became a symbol of Christmas.

Another ancient story tells that as the Christ-Child lay surrounded by worshippers, three trees stood outside the manger. The palm tree shed its lucious fruit on the threshold as a gift to the Infant Jesus; the olive, bending its branches, offered its fruit and healing oils. But the little fir tree with nothing to offer stood lonely and wistful, clothed in its green branches. The stars in heaven looked down in pity from the skies and rested on its branches, twinkling and sparkling like diamonds. The radiance shone for miles around and the Child, seeing the beauty of the tree, clapped His hands in joy, loving the little evergreen tree beyond all the others. To this day the evergreen tree has delighted mankind at Christmas.

The first use of a Christmas tree was in the medieval German Paradise Plays, held outdoors and

portraying the creation of man. The Tree of Life was a fir tree, hung with apples. Later other ornaments were hung upon them, such as paper flowers and gilded nuts. In England, especially, branches or whole trees were forced into bloom indoors for Christmas. From these beginnings the use of a tree at Christmas was established. Martin Luther was perhaps the first to use a lighted tree.

The story is told that on one Christmas Eve Martin Luther wandered outdoors and became enraptured with the beauty of the starry sky. Its brilliance and loveliness led him to reflect on the glory of the first Christmas Eve as seen in Bethlehem's radiant skies. Wishing to share with his wife and children the enchantment he had felt, he cut from the forest an evergreen, glistening with snow, and took it home. He placed upon it candles to represent the glorious heavens he had seen. The use of a candle-lighted tree spread and all Europe, then America, came to regard it as the fairest ornament

of Christmas. Prince Albert and Queen Victoria had one with lights and gifts upon it in Windsor Castle in 1841. Paris had set up a beautifully decorated tree in a park the year previous.

In the early decades following Albert and Victoria's tree in Windsor Castle no useful presents were ever placed upon the tree's branches; they went on a table nearby or underneath the tree. Only the shining ornament adorned the tree. Often in Southern Europe was found a Creche beneath its branches and later this custom was adopted by America and other countries and is now frequently seen everywhere.

Famous Christmas trees in America are the General Grant tree in California, designated in 1925 as America's Christmas tree; a live oak of more than 110 foot spread in Wilmington, North Carolina, mecca of thousands annually at Christmas when it is brilliantly illuminated with many lights; and, since the days of President John Adams, the Christmas tree in the White House for the first family of our country.



THE BIRDS' CHRISTMAS TREE

LOVED first by the people of Norway, the custom of a Christmas feast for the animals and birds has now spread widely over the world. Especially here in America the Birds' Christmas Tree has become one of the delights of the season. Families or groups choose a beautiful live, thick evergreen, usually a cedar tree, and hang on its branches a veritable feast for the birds. Suet, nutmeats, bright strings of cranberries, seeds pressed into pine cones and apples make a colorful and tempting dinner for the birds at Christmastime. Their happy chatter soon rewards us for our remembrance of them, too, as one of God's loved creations.



SANTA CLAUS

T is scarcely more than a hundred years since we have had our jolly, fat Santa Claus with red, ermine-trimmed clothes. From the Fourth Century until the early 1800's, the patron saint of children had been St. Nicholas, portrayed as a white-bearded, black-robed old gentleman on a gray mare and having as his day December 6th. The Dutch brought him to New York where they named streets and churches in his honor. The English there loved him too, but changed his day to Christmas. Meanwhile his fancied appearance was changing; his face

grew more ruddy and jovial, his lean figure became more plump, and his name was shortened to Santa Klaus. He now had a bright fur-trimmed suit and he traveled with reindeer and sleigh—so the people said. Thus he was when Washington Irving described him in 1809.

Events were to happen shortly, however, that were to bring us the Santa we know so well today. On December 22, 1822, Dr. Clement Clarke Moore, Professor in New York Theological Seminary, wrote for his five children's pleasure a poem telling the story of a visit St. Nicholas made one Christmas Eve. Miss Butler, a visitor in the home, sent the poem the next December to the Troy, New York, *Sentinel* where it was published on December 23, 1823. The response was immediate and favorable, greatly chagrining Dr. Moore who did not consider the poem worthy of his best efforts. The author had in his word picture of St. Nicholas described a portly Dutch gentleman whom he knew. So vivid was the description that

Tommy Nast, Cartoonist of Morristown, N. J. was inspired to draw two Santas in 1863. One was a favorite of President Lincoln and the Union Troops. The other showed this same jolly Santa on a chimney. Subsequent drawings by Nast, some to illustrate an edition of Dr. Moore's "The Visit of St. Nicholas," fixed Santa's appearance as we know him. One of America's contributions to Christmas lies in the personality of Santa Claus, whose only desire is to make children happy.

The fact that Santa comes down the chimney has been attributed to the belief long held by peoples of Northern Europe that the Hearth Goddess, Hertha, descended through the smoke to the hearth. A low altar of stones, upon which a fire was kindled, was built to her and around this families celebrated their festivals. Hertha was said to guard good children and to be a terror to the bad ones.

GREETING CARDS AT CHRISTMAS

KIND thoughts at Christmas going out to those who were absent from the family celebration led to the use of Christmas cards. The first card as we now know them was sent in 1844 to friends by the Englishman, W. C. Dobson, a favorite painter of Queen Victoria. However, it was the fate of another Englishman, Sir Henry Cole, in 1846 to inadvertently popularize their use. Sir Henry commissioned the artist John Calcott Horsley to design a card expressing his holiday greetings to his friends. This lithographed card had a central panel showing the Cole family around the wassail bowl and side panels on the card showing acts of charity to the poor at Christmas. An uproar arose in which Sir Henry was accused of promoting drunkenness. The resulting publicity promoted the then novel idea of sending Christmas cards. By 1847, numbers of persons were sending them to their friends and the custom has spread around the world.

THE POINSETTIA



POINSETTIAS at Christmastime came into use only little more than a century ago, first in the Southern United States, rapidly becoming popular over the entire country. Dr. Joel R. Poinsett of Charleston, South Carolina, after four years as Minister of Mexico, brought in 1829 this striking red and green plant to his home "Casa Bianca." The people of Mexico call it the "Flower of the Holy Night." Although botanists have developed several varieties of the lovely plant, the original blazing scarlet and green poinsettia, as first introduced into cultivation by Dr. Poinsett, is still the favorite Christmas flower.

FIRECRACKERS



FIRE shooting of firecrackers and cannon crackers to welcome in Christmas Morn and to salute neighbors on adjacent plantations has been an established custom in the Southern United

States since colonial times. This mode of greeting one another on Christmas arose because of the distance separating families and perhaps also out of the fervor of Christmas joy commonly found in that region where feasting and a long holiday has traditionally been observed.



CHRISTMAS SEALS

EINAR HOLBOLL, a post office clerk in Denmark in 1903, was busily cancelling the postage on Christmas letters and cards carrying messages of good will and happiness. He thought—Wouldn't it be wonderful if there were a special stamp at Christmastime that would symbolize

a gift to those ill with Tuberculosis? With the help of other citizens of that country in designing the stamp and with the encouragement of King Christian IX, the first seal sale was launched in 1904. Over four million Christmas seals bearing, at the King's request, the late Queen Louise's portrait, were sold that year through Norwegian post offices. A grateful country later decorated Einar Holboll for his unselfish work, and when he died in 1927, his portrait appeared on the Christmas seal for that year.

Meanwhile, Northern Europe had quickly adopted the idea of a Christmas Seal Sale, and in 1907 they were placed on sale in America. Jacob Riis, the famous journalist who had lost six brothers from Tuberculosis, had in 1904, suggested the idea of an American sale. But it remained for Miss Emily P. Bissell, Secretary of the Delaware Red Cross to design and promote our first seal sale. It was a half-wreath of holly, centered with a red cross and the words "Merry Christmas." Miss Bissell was supported in the idea by the Phila-

adelphia North American which made the seal sale front page news. This first sale raised three thousand dollars for Brandywine Hospital for Tubercular patients. From 1907 until 1919 the American Red Cross and the National Tuberculosis Association jointly sponsored the sale. Since that year the National Tuberculosis Association has assumed full responsibility for the work. Now, because of the Christmas Seal Sale, a tiny square of paper has become a powerful weapon in freeing mankind all over the world from the disease of Tuberculosis.

In 1906 the International Tuberculosis Association adopted the double-barrelled Cross of the 10th Century Crusader, the Duke of Lorraine, as its symbol of concerted action against a common enemy.



CAROLS AND CAROLING

A DELIGHTFUL experience of the Christmas season is to go caroling or to have carols sung at one's door. (The birthplace of the carol is Italy where it originated largely due to the influence of St. Francis of Assisi who lived in the 13th Century. His comrades sang little songs they had composed on the great facts of the Gospel and Christ's love for man as they stood around the manger scene St. Francis had prepared. This dramatization of the narrative of St. Luke and the singing of the simple carols to the Christ-Child spread over all Europe and indeed finally the world.)

Our Christmas music has a heritage from many Christian lands. The Ancient Greek Church gave us "O Gladsome Light," especially fitting for our candle-light services. From the old Latin Church we have

the Christmas hymn of Ambrose "Savior of the Nations, Come," and the lovely "Of The Father's Love Begotten" by Prudentius. The later middle ages gave us "Now Sing We, Now Rejoice" and others beautiful and rich in feeling. From the Reformation period we have Luther's "Cradle Hymn" and carols by Herrick and Wither, and following the Restoration the loved, "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks By Night" by Nahum Tate.

The custom of Caroling came to full flower in England with colorfully costumed bands of singers going from home to home and through the streets during the Christmas season. On Christmas Day the church choirs led the congregations in carols used in place of hymns. In the homes, too, at Christmastime carols were sung at the family's festivities with groups of wandering "Waits" or singers often appearing to sing for a share of the Christmas feast.

One of the most popular English carols was recently rediscovered in the Kentucky Mountains of

our country. It is the "Cherry Tree Carol," sometimes called "The Legend of Joseph and the Angel." Often divided into two parts, the second part is the better known one entitled, "When Joseph Was A-Walking."

Indigenous to American Christmas Music are a few Christmas carols from the early American spiritual folk songs. One of these, "Rise Up, Shepherd, And Follet," by its beautifully simple melody and the sincerity of its entreaty might be proudly claimed by any nation. Also loved in this small, select group of native American carols is "Wasn't That A Mighty Day?" The charm and quaintness of "The Babe of Bethlehem," published in *The Southern Harmony* in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1835, give it a place among the treasures of Christmas Music.

The earliest American Carol with a known author is The Huron Indian Carol about 1641, called "Jesous Ahatenhia." It was composed by the missionary Father Breheuf for the tribe because of their devotion for the night of Christ's birth. The tune is that of

 An old French Carol, "The Young Maiden."

America has contributed to the world some of the best-loved Christmas songs in the hymns of Phillips Brooks, a renowned Episcopal clergyman of Holy Trinity Church, Philadelphia who later became Rector of Trinity Church, Boston, and finally served as Bishop of Massachusetts. The Reverend Mr. Brooks in 1865 visited the Holy Land. Here amid sacred Biblical scenes he received the inspiration for "O, Little Town Of Bethlehem," which he carried in his heart for three years before composing the words of the hymn. A lover of children, he wrote the hymn for Sunday School Christmas Program of Holy Trinity Church in 1868 and it became immediately greatly admired and sung everywhere.

Reverend John Henry Hopkins, Jr., son of the first Episcopal Bishop of Vermont, author of several books on music and Founder of the *Church Journal*, when 37 years old wrote the carol, "We, Three Kings Of Orient Are." Reverend Hopkins once said, "One

good hymn does more for the devotion of a church than several volumes of sermons." His hymn, based on Mathew 52:1-12, helps to prove the truth of his famous statement.

When our country at Christmas in 1863 lay under the cloud of war, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, with a son severely wounded, longed for peace. His thoughts found expression in his carol, "Christmas Bells." The "peace on earth, goodwill to men" of the angels' song on the first Christmas was echoed in the poet's heart and in his beautiful hymn.



THE BELLS AND SILENT NIGHT

 CHRISTMAS joy naturally overflows into music and it was about the Fourth Century A. D. when bells first pealed forth in

✓ glad song at Christmas. Of all our Christmas symbols, the bells have suffered the fewest changes. Church bells whose paeans have so gladdened the hearts of mankind throughout the ages are said to have been originated by Bishop Paulinus of Nola in Campania, Italy, who died in 431 A. D. From these two names has come Campanula, the Latin word for bell. Medieval peoples had a very tender feeling for bells—they were dedicated with prayers, and regarded as almost living beings. Historical bells that have rung out the glad news at Christmas are the Emperor Bell in Moscow the Great Bell of China at Peking, Big Ben of London and the Liberty Bell of Philadelphia. There must not be any of them that have not pealed forth *Silent Night*, best loved and most widely known carol since its composition 150 years ago. The story of its writing is as inspiring as is the song itself. Franz Gruber of Salzburg, Germany, following his father's wish for him was a weaver by day, but by night he secretly hurried to the village schoolmaster

and organist who taught him to read and write and to play the organ. Music was deep in the heart of the boy and he worked hard to perfect himself. When the organist fell ill, little Franz played the entire service from memory. His father then permitted him to study music and at twenty years of age he became a teacher and organist for a neighboring village. A close friend of his was the village priest, Joseph Mohr, who came to Gruber near Christmas in 1796, worried because the organ was unfit for use and saying, "We must have something special for midnight Mass." Late in the still, snowy night before Christmas Eve, Father Mohr, returning through the fields from blessing the new-born infant of a parishioner, thought about the first Christmas night in Bethlehem. On his silent way home through the peaceful countryside, the beauty and tranquillity of Bethlehem's Holy Night so long ago crept over him. The words of the lovely hymn, *Silent Night, Holy Night*, flowed to him from the heavens above the radiant landscape

and from his love and devotion to the Christ-Child whose birth he was about to celebrate in his village church. Next morning he took the verses that he had written to Gruber. Upon reading the inspired words, the strains of the melody were born from the spirit of the hymn. That night with the broken organ silent, Mohr sang his song to the accompaniment of Gruber's guitar. The listeners in the small church were awed by the beauty of the hymn, and as they trudged homeward over the crusty snow, they carried the song with them in their hearts.

The organ builder, Mauracher from Zillertal, who repaired the organ was likewise struck by the unusual beauty of the hymn and requested that it be sung again. "People will love this song," he said, and went away home over the mountains also carrying it in his heart, but knowing neither its name nor the name of its author or composer.

As he approached his village the children came to meet him, drawn by the loveliness of the song he

was singing. The children called it "The Song From Heaven" and four unusually gifted ones arranged it for a quartette. These Strasser children for many years sang *Silent Night* at fairs and outdoor markets where they sold gloves. Finally they were invited to sing it for the King and Queen of Saxony at a Concert in Leipzig and at the Court Chapel on Christmas Eve in 1822.

The Strassers now became concert singers and after singing *Silent Night* for the King of Prussia in Berlin, it was put into the repertoire of the Berlin Cathedral Choir. Later, when Frederick William was King of Prussia, he was impressed by the beauty of the hymn as the choir sang it at Christmas Day Services, but he was also annoyed to read in his hymnal, "Author and Composer Unknown." With military thoroughness he immediately began an inquiry for the facts. The quaking Choirmaster did not know but declared that he would search for the information. Nothing was found out, however, and the angry

King turned to the Royal Concertmaster, Ludwig Erk. Although Erk was versed in both the work of the great music masters and in folk songs as well, he, too, did not know. "Well, it can't have dropped from Heaven," said Frederick William impatiently. "Go, and look for it. I want order in the Prussian Hymn Book." From the Royal Music Library, to Vienna, to other cities and towns went Erk, but without success. Sadly he started homeward, stopping in a small village inn near the Austrian border.

The inn was charming, the food good, everyone polite, but Ludwig Erk thought only of how he would explain his failure to his King. A bullfinch in a corner started warbling a sweet tune. Suddenly Erk gave a violent start, and the innkeeper ran up, frightened. "The bird," shouted Erk, "He's singing my song." Learning that a travelet had left the bird which he had purchased from St. Peter's Abbey, Erk wrote to the King while he waited for a stagecoach for Salsburg that the mystery was all but solved

since Michael Hayden had lived there and must undoubtedly have written the song.

A week's search among the Hayden music scores, however, brought no *Silent Night* to light and the monks declared firmly that no birds were trained at St. Peter's. So the next edition of the Prussian Hymn Book said of *Silent Night*, "Supposedly by Michael Hayden."

Although the monks were certain no bullfinches were trained at St. Peter's, the Choirmaster was not so sure. He felt that some of his boys might disobey and thus earn a small allowance by training and selling the birds. He therefore hid himself outside the window and whistled *Silent Night* just as a bullfinch might do. He was rewarded when a voice said, "Hey, your bird has come back," and in a moment a nine year old boy crept around the corner on tiptoe to catch the winged singer.

Inquiring where the boy had learned the song, the Choirmaster received the proud answer "Why,

from my father. He wrote the song and is Choirmaster and Organist in Hallein."

Felix Xaver Gruber was surprised to receive a visit two days later from his son and the Choirmaster, but the request for a score of *Silent Night* and the story of the long search surprised him more. He wrote the score just as he had 35 years before, omitting all the added notes, correcting the changed time and adding two verses that the organ builder had forgotten on his way home over the mountains. Also for Ludwig Erk he wrote out very painstakingly, "An Authentic History of the Composition of the Christmas Song *Silent Night*."

The portraits of Gruber and Mohr in stone now adorn the walls of the old church where they first sang *Silent Night*. And, too, the prophecy made by Marie Gruber when she first heard her husband sing the song has indeed come true—"We will die, but *Silent Night* will live on after we are gone."

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